Jewish Presences in English Literature

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Literary Jews and the Breakdown of the Medieval Testamental Pattern

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In the second of the one hundred stories in his *Decameron*,[1] written in Italy during the years following the plague of 1348, Boccaccio tells the story of a learned Jew named Abraham. A friend, a rich Christian merchant, wants very much to have Abraham become a Christian, so the Jew decides to visit Rome and watch the behaviour of the pope and the cardinals to decide whether he should convert. Although his Christian friend tries to dissuade him, since he knows that the church leaders are corrupt and fears that Abraham will never change religions if he sees what is really going on, Abraham makes the trip. When he returns he has been convinced that Christianity must be the true faith and undergoes baptism. His reasons are not that he has found virtue and holiness in Rome: on the contrary, he has found greed, sexual corruption, and selfishness wherever he looked. It is this fact that wins him over, for if a religion which is so riddled with corruption and decay can survive and flourish, it obviously must be relying on and receiving direct divine aid.

In many ways, this tale highlights the problems we have in reading medieval literature to learn about medieval Jews or about medieval Christian attitudes toward Jews. It may be untypical in its humour and its biting satire, but it shares several features with other medieval stories with Jewish characters. In the first place, it contains none of the stereotyped anti-Semitic portraits that we might expect, given today's negative overtones to the word "medieval." More important, however, is the fact that the story is not really about Jews at all, not even about the Jew Abraham. Its major purpose is not to say something about Judaism, but to satirize and condemn the abuses of the papal

court in a way that brackets and insulates the charges so that the author could not be condemned for anti-Christian sentiments. The stereotyped image of the Jew as a usurious, narrowly legalistic Christ-killer has its origins in the Middle Ages. But to characterize this image as "medieval" in order to distance ourselves from it, as if it could be "written out" of the present and explained away as an aberration when it appears in modern literature, is a serious distortion of medieval literary practice. The characters in many medieval texts are "types," signs of particular concepts; Jews are frequently used as signs of a particular stage in human development; and anyone, Christian, Pagan, or Jew, who exhibits certain traits can perform that particular signifying role. The role in question (Abraham's) was, in the Middle Ages, an element in a three-stage developmental plotline; this "conversion plot," as the context in which the stereotyped image was placed, did a great deal to control and mitigate the negative impact of the stock image. Once the developmental pattern was separated from the standard progression from Pagan to Jew to Christian, however, the violence inherent in the characterization lost all constraint.

Many medieval narratives are grounded in the notion that both individual human beings and the human race as a whole are on a path which leads from nature through law to grace. In the state of nature, concord between people is a matter of pure self-interest, discord is governed only by the constraints of physical strength, and speech is simply another tool for gaining one's ends, with little or no concern for factual accuracy or honourable intent. A medieval author wishing to signify this stage had many stock types at his disposal: giants, children of Cain, Pagans, "Saracens." The practice of the author of *The Song of Roland*[2] serves as a good example. The "Saracens" are shown worshiping an inverted trinity, made up of Mohammed, Termagant, and Apollyon, and this marks them as anti-Christian. When they make agreements with others, they have no intention of keeping their word and no desire to increase the general level of human harmony, but are only trying to maintain their own power through deceit; the Pagan king promises Charlemagne that he and all his people will become Christians and even offers hostages as a guarantee, but among themselves the Pagans admit that they will never do so and will sacrifice their hostages if need be. In warfare they do not play fair; they use treachery to set up a battle in which they will vastly outnumber the Christian forces in the rearguard, led by the emperor's nephew Roland.

They live in a world which is insistently physical, worshiping statues and relying on brute force; their defeat is a sign to the Christian audience that such a view is incorrect. In the process they act as Christ-killers: their chief victim, Roland, is betrayed by a Judas-figure, is willing to die in order to carry out his mission for God and Emperor, and is taken to heaven as a sign of martyrdom.

The second stage of the process is initiated by people willing to live under the rule of law. Their agreements are not temporary matters of policy but permanent covenants – two parties state what they will do and affirm that they will adhere to their promises. Discord is governed by the rule of strictly equivalent retribution: "an eye for an eye" was seen, by Augustine and others, as a principle restraining the "natural" human impulse to respond to an injury with a far greater injury. Speech is judged according to factual accuracy: the truthful person is the one whose words correspond with the facts as they are and whose promises are carried out to the letter. A medieval author wanting to depict this stage quickly and recognizably would create a character who is a Jew; more often than not, of course, such an author would show greater interest in the problems and contradictions thought to be inherent in such a view of human action in the world. The spirit behind equal retribution is often shown to be as vicious as that of the original crime, and adherence to "the letter" of a promise is often far from satisfying to someone who had a different understanding of the words when they were first spoken.

The third and final stage which these authors imagined was analogous to the theologian's idea of grace and mercy. Within a narrative world tolerably close to the real world of the audience, the perfected Christian hero speaks words whose intent is to increase harmony in the world and love of one's fellow man, gives all that he has to ensure concord, and refuses to repay evil for evil. Struggles with renegades are intended to bring about their reformation, not to exact vengeance, and free gifts are made for the benefit of others, where in the second stage there were only mercantile bargains to ensure mutual gain. Such a stage is most easily depicted in the person of a saint or a hermit, but the static nature of such characters relegated them to minor roles in most secular narratives, so that in most romances this level is best observed in characters who have reached it, arduously, after experiencing difficulties in living in the first two worlds.

The Pagan, the Jew, and the Saint are the stereotyped images of these three stages. They correspond to three stages in the history of the whole human race as seen by medieval thinkers, and to three stages in the spiritual development of the individual. In fact, rather than being present in stories of Pagans who first convert to Judaism and then to Christianity, this pattern is most often exemplified in the stories of individuals who are nominally Christian but start off their careers, in the narrative, at one of the "earlier" stages and move toward the goal that has been set for them through a carefully ordered sequences of partial successes and setbacks. Conversely, other literary characters, even some whom later criticism calls "heroes," never complete the developmental process and even backslide into the world of self-interested agreement and physical "overkill" in response to injury. An examination of a few such narratives will display more clearly the background into which Jews, and the characteristics medieval authors ascribed to them, were placed.

The "eye for an eye" pattern, in which violent action is the dominant topic, is examined, for example, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.*[3] The court of King Arthur is presented as a group of knights with a state-of-nature desire for combat between two knights, as a kind of entertainment: the Christmas festivities cannot really begin until some adventure has come to the court or there has been a fight between two knights willing to risk their lives. The "adventure" that arrives, however, is an enigmatic Green Knight, who introduces the rule of law into the narrative in the form of a challenge to balance violent actions in precisely equivalent terms: one of Arthur's knights is to strike him, and then, a year later, to receive an equivalent blow in return. Although Gawain decapitates him, the Green Knight does not die, and Gawain is contractually obliged to submit to justice, according to the principle of "a head for a head." While he is on his way, as he thinks, to his death, he makes another covenant with a man who gives him lodging: at the end of each day, each man will give the other what he has won. Gawain fulfils this promise for two days, but on the third, he keeps a supposedly magical girdle his host's wife has given him, believing that it will save his life. Despite his breach of the "law," Gawain is spared by the Green Knight: under the terms of their agreement, he could cut off Gawain's head, but instead he merely nicks his neck, as "penance" for keeping the girdle. The audience has seen a series of tableaux depicting lawless nature

superseded by the rule of law which is fulfilled in the free gift of grace.[4]

The covenant pattern is presented in a twelfth-century romance by Chrétien de Troyes called *Yvain*.[5] The hero, who has married the widow of a knight whom he killed in combat, under rather dubious circumstances, promises his wife that he will return to her after a one-year period of chivalric jousting and adventure. He forgets the time, thereby breaking his covenant, and so loses her love. His remorse causes him to regress to a period of solitary, animal-like wandering; this is followed by a regeneration signified by a succession of more and more altruistic adventures. Finally he is granted her love again, by her free choice, rather than by right of conquest as before. First he wins the woman by violence, then he comes to deserve her through just actions, then he receives her love as a free gift.

The "letter of the law" pattern is manifested in the tale told by the Franklin in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.[6] While her husband is away, a woman agrees, in jest, to commit adultery with a young man if he can remove all the rocks from the coastline, rocks which symbolize for her the dangers threatening her travelling husband. Much later, with the help of a magician, the young man succeeds and calls upon the lady to be true to her word. Her husband even insists, over her protests, that her honour depends on fidelity to the letter of her promise, so she goes to the young man, ready to do his bidding. He is so moved by her self-sacrifice that he frees her from her bargain, and in return he is released from his debt to the magician. Once it begins to operate, the spirit of mercy spreads, and we are left with the hope that the woman's marriage, presented initially as a bargain based on equivalent exchanges, will henceforth be grounded in a more spiritual gift of love.

For a modern reader, none of these stories has any connection with Jews or Judaism at all. Yet for a medieval reader, the themes of covenant, equivalent justice, and literalism carry overtones of the Christian view of the Old Testament. This is the background, the literary background at least, against which medieval stories about Jews need to be examined.

Despite the common-sense modern view, medieval writers saw no contradiction between the Old Testament commandments and their re-interpretations in the New Testament. The first covenant was not abrogated, but fulfilled in the second; the

letter of the law was not abolished, but transmuted into the spirit; and the injunction to turn the other cheek was seen as a fulfilling progression from the principle of restraining oneself to an equivalent retribution, not as a contradictory commandment. The Old Testament was regarded as the word of God, and hence true, although in need of spiritual exegesis in order to be properly understood; to argue either that it could be understood in a purely literal way or that it had been completely replaced by the New Testament was regarded as dangerous heresy.

The place imposed upon the Jews by this scheme was ambiguous. They were not, like Moslems, assimilated to pure evil, since the book in which they believed was seen as divinely inspired and not, like the Koran, regarded as a fabrication by a renegade and heretical human. Literary Jews were therefore condemned by Christians not for belief in something false but for stubborn adherence to the letter of their text in the face of pressure to accept the Christian version of its spiritual meaning. This view of Jewish beliefs goes back at least to the Gospel of John, where Jews are shown insisting on a clumsily literal interpretation of Jesus' metaphorical statements, and where "Jew" has become almost a technical term for those who refuse to accept him as the messiah. Jesus himself is presented, quite unhistorically, as referring to the Jews as "they," as if he was not one of them.

Nevertheless, at least in the earliest of the medieval English texts, a certain respect is shown for the knowledge, wisdom, and scholarship of the Jew. When, in Cynewulf's *Elene* (ninth century), the mother of the emperor Constantine comes to Judea in order to find the true cross, she summons "a thousand men of discerning mind in a throng such as were most completely familiar with ancient tradition among the Jews." The important Jews, in this narrative, are therefore those who are most aware of and obedient to Jewish law; the "Christ-killers" are the Jews of the past, who actually plotted the crucifixion, not their descendants. Once the scholars have assembled, Elene addresses them, attempting to win them over through arguments based on standard Christian proof texts from the Old Testament:

Listen, you of discerning mind, to the divine mystery, the word and the wisdom. Now, you have received the teaching of the prophets, how the Author of life was born in the form of a child, the mighty Ruler, of whom Moses, defender of the Israelites, sang and said these words: "To you shall be born in obscurity a boy renowned for his powers, whose

mother shall not grow pregnant with offspring through a man's love-making." Of him King David, the wise prophet, Solomon's father, sang a noble song, and the warrior's lord declared these words: "I have kept before my gaze the God of creation and Lord of victories. He, Ruler of the hosts, has been in my sight, and the glorious shepherd has been at my right hand; from him shall I not turn my face ever to eternity."[7]

Finally, one of their number, appropriately named Judas, is singled out for special attention, and after a great deal of resistance that the empress meets with stern force, he reveals the location of the three crosses. When he arrives at the spot where they are buried, he asks for a sign to show whether or not Jesus was truly God's son. When the pleasant smoke he requests rises from the ground, Judas is convinced. In order to determine which of the three crosses is the right one, and which are those of the two thieves who were crucified with Jesus, they raise them, one by one over a corpse, at the precise hour when Jesus died: "Then the third one was lifted up in its holiness. The corpse was in waiting until the Prince's cross was reared above him, the tree of the heaven-King, the true emblem of victory. At once he rose up, furnished with his spirit, body and soul both together. There was seemly praise exalted among the people; they honoured the Father, and extolled aloud the true Son of the Ruler: 'To him be glory and the thanks of all creatures for ever without end.'"[8] In due course, Judas is baptized, takes the name Cyriacus (here etymologized as "the Saviour's revelation") and becomes a bishop who ministers to the converted Jews and spreads the word. In this poem, the negative image of the Jew is present only in the Christ-killers of the historical past, while the "good Jews," loosely corresponding to the positive images which Deborah Heller has found in Dickens and Eliot, are here those who are open to the possibilities of ceasing to be Jews at all: even Satan can see that while he once had a sort of victory through the actions of another Judas, this Judas has now furthered the process of his defeat.

The function of such a work is to strengthen the faith of its Christian audience, not to make a statement to or about Jews in the poet's society. At every stage in the poem, concern is shown for the process by which Christian belief spreads, first to the emperor Constantine through a vision of the cross, then to his mother, then to Judas and his compatriots, and then to the poet and his audience. This process may be accomplished through divinely granted visions, through human persuasion,

through a combination of persuasion, force and miracles, or through inspired reading of religious texts. The goal of the process is summed up in Cynewulf's prayer: "May the gate of hell be closed and heaven's unlocked and the realm of angels opened everlastingly, may their joy be eternal and their portion assigned them with Mary, for everyone who holds in remembrance the festival of the most precious rood beneath the skies which the most mighty, the sovereign Lord of all, overspread with his arms."[9]

This pattern, which was seen as optimistic by its original users, did not survive completely intact, although the broad outline of the paradigm endured. By the mid-fifteenth century, several of the elements in the structure were being presented in a much more negative form, although the ultimate goal of the narrated events was still described in glowingly positive terms. The Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, most likely written shortly after 1461 when the events it describes were reputed to have happened, sees Jews not just as resistant to Christian beliefs concealed behind Jewish texts but as malevolently opposed to Christian doctrine. A Jewish merchant named Jonathas, who is described as a follower of the laws of Mohammed, refuses to accept the Christian belief in transubstantiation: "The belief of these Christian men is false, as I think; for they believe in a cake – I think it is unnatural. They say that the priest binds it, and by the power of his words makes it flesh and blood – thus by a conceit they would make us blind – and that it is the one who died upon the cross."[10] To test and disprove this foolish belief, he arranges to buy a piece of consecrated bread from Aristorius, a Christian merchant. The merchant keeps insisting that he would not sell it for a hundred pounds, but when Jonathas's offer rises from twenty pounds, to forty pounds, and finally to one hundred pounds, Aristorius agrees. This extended bargaining could be seen, from the medieval point of view, simply as a sign that Jews operate by contract and as an indication of spiritual blindness, for Jonathas says openly that he wants to buy "your almighty God, in a cake." But the insistence on the monetary and mercantile nature of the contract is also an indication of the Renaissance stereotype of the Jew as a usurious merchant who is not properly grateful for this material possessions in the world: unlike the Christian, who thanks and worships God for his prosperity, Jonathas thanks Mohammed before he goes into a thirty-two line description of all of his valuable property.

Once they have obtained the mass-wafer, through the help of Aristorius and the negligence of a priest, the Jews place it on a table, and after a mocking rehearsal of Christian belief, they attack it with daggers. In this period, then, the Jews who are of interest to the narrative *are* Christ-killers, for they re-enact an attack on Christ's body in the host. When it bleeds, they decide to throw it into a boiling cauldron, but it clings to Jonathas's hand. His servants nail the bread to a pillar and try to pull him away from it, but his hand breaks off. The violence and the resistance continue until a crucifix appears above the fiery furnace, and Jesus commands them to stop their blasphemy. All the Jews instantly convert and confess to a bishop, in whose presence the speaking crucifix is transformed back into the wafer. Jonathas's hand is healed, he and the other Jews are baptized, and Aristorius and the careless priest are assigned proper penance.

Once again, despite the undoubtedly negative and vicious portrayal of Jonathas and his servants, the major concern of the play is not with either Jews or Judaism. Early critics found it difficult to connect this play to social conditions in England in the period, where there had been no Jews for almost two hundred years. The explanation is, as before, that the stage Jews are simply playing a part in a story whith a Christian didactic purpose. The virulent anti-Semitism of the French, Dutch, and Italian analogues has been muted and subordinated to an argument in favour of those parts of Catholic doctrine which were under assault from the English Lollards. These early Protestants denied transubstantiation, condemned the veneration of crucifixes and other images, and denied the necessity of oral confession to a priest. All of these points of doctrine are "proved" by the action of the play, and the Christian author has delivered his message to his Christian audience.[11]

Despite the striking differences in tone and the substitution of the merchant role for the scholar role, the structure of *The Play of the Sacrament* still exhibits strong similarities to that of *Elene*, even after the passage of over five hundred years. In both works, in order to strengthen or reform the belief of their audiences, the authors tell stories about Jews whose quarrel is not with individual Christians but with Christian beliefs. The goal of the Christian characters and the end point of the narrative is the conversion of the Jews, not their punishment or destruction, and this is effected by means of a miracle. The doubt and resistance of the Jews is overcome in the story so

that doubt and heresy may be removed from the Christian audience.

The persistence of at least the basic elements of this optimistic plot line makes it all the more difficult to understand Chaucer's *The Prioress's Tale*, written some seventy years before *The Play of the Sacrament*, or to see it as an indication of Chaucer's own point of view rather than as his display of the errors of the Prioress. In the Prioress's narrative, Jews are presented not only as opponents of Christian doctrine but also as vicious murderers of an innocent little boy who walks through the ghetto singing a Latin hymn in praise of the virgin Mary. The Prioress goes to great lengths to make her audience sympathize with this boy and with his poor mother, pulling out all the emotional and rhetorical stops available. Despite the fact that the boy's throat has been cut, he continues to sing his hymn, and the Christians are therefore able to find his body and give it proper burial, after brutally killing all the Jews who knew anything at all about the boy's death.

This plot is a grotesque parody of the pattern in *Elene* and *The Play of the Sacrament*. Instead of leading to the spread of faith and Christian charity, the miracle which Mary provides does nothing more than allow the Christians to exact mindless vengeance. There is no possibility for conversion, and even the Christian audience is invited to become obsessed with evil, not to become aware of mercy. Even though it is expressed in terms of equal and opposite justice, the Christian provost's statement, "For evil must have evil's just desert,"[12] leads rather to a "state of nature" overkill in which many people are punished, by being first torn apart by horses and then hanged. The progression is not from vengeance to law to mercy, but quite the reverse.

Despite the difficulties in seeing this work as representing Chaucer's attitude toward Jews, it is also not possible to believe that his primary purpose was to expose and criticize the evils of anti-Semitism. Rather, the violence and repulsiveness of the conclusion of the Prioress's story focus attention on her deficient understanding of Christian doctrine. The inversion of the traditional pattern shows that she does not comprehend the functioning of salvation history. The root cause of her difficulties is her over-valuation of simple faith, the "innocence" whose dangers Allen Koretsky has demonstrated, and her corresponding lack of interest in the need for active works of charity. Her hero is not a person with a firm belief grounded in knowledge of doctrine, but a completely passive child who merely sings words

in praise of Mary without even understanding the language in which they were written. Throughout both her prologue and her tale, the Prioress shows an excessive regard for miraculous powers and no concern at all for what can be done by human efforts. Similarly, the Jews in her story do not perform their actions of their own free will, but are presented simply as pawns for Satan, who inspires them to put a stop to the boy's perceived insult. They are much more like the Moslems in the *Chanson de Roland* or in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* than like the Jews of the salvation history narratives, and foreshadow in a frightening way the Satanic portraits of Shylock and Fagin. In fact, the Prioress is not even as optimistic as the authors and tellers of the stories about Pagans, since in them many of the previously evil Moslems are converted, whereas her tale ends only with destruction. The Prioress sees life as a battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil, but it is carried on exclusively by supernatural opponents, with the humans being little more than puppets. If we can see Chaucer as depicting the errors of the Prioress through this tale, then the optimistic pattern was still in force and had value for him, even though his manner of revealing this was through a demonstration of the ugliness which ensues when the paradigm is inverted by a storyteller whose faith is merely passive.

By the late sixteenth century, however, the tensions that result from using an identifiable social group to play a part in a mythic structure had reached the breaking point. This can be seen in two Renaissance dramas which can justly be said to present anti-Semitic portraits of Jews, Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*[13] and Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta.*[14] Although a modern reader's dominant memories of *The Merchant* will be of Shylock and the pound of flesh, it is possible, at least for a medievalist, to imagine a version of its plot in which his role is radically reduced or even played by someone other than a Jew. The entire fifth act, aftr all, unfolds without any reference to him or to the "bond plot" in which he is a central figure. Such a story would be analogous in structure to Chrétien's *Yvain.* In the casket plot, Bassanio wins Portia in marriage through his successful completion of a task he accepts in a covenant made, in effect, with Portia's dead father: she is granted to him in return for his choice of the correct casket. She involves him in another covenant, with herself this time rather than her father, when she gives him her ring and exacts his promise never to give it away. When he does give it away, to the disguised Portia

in gratitude for her rescue of Antonio, it is not a sign that he loves Antonio more than he loves Portia, but an indication from the author to the audience that gratitude and love, as concerns of the spirit, are more important than the adherence to the letter of any contract. Further, as a result of Bassanio's breach of contract, Portia is made completely free to follow the dictates of her heart; at the end of the play it is clear to everyone that she is married to him because she wants to be, not because she must.

In a medieval or even early Renaissance work, Shylock and the bond plot would have been clearly subordinated to this pattern. The mercantile bargain with Antonio, which establishes the equivalence between a pound of flesh and the money he lends, and his insistence on taking exactly what was promised rather than any amount of money, could be seen as underlining the stagnancy of contractual relationships and the self-destructiveness of adherence to the letter of an agreement. But Shylock's story contains too many gratuitous negative details to allow us to see it only in such a subsidiary manner. Shylock is not led away from his concern with contracts and the letter into a belief in mercy, and none of the Christian characters shows him any of the mercy about which Portia speaks so eloquently. Rather, to the principle of "those who live by the sword shall die by the sword" is applied to him. The "letter" of his contract allows him to take only one pound of flesh, but no blood; the impossibility of following such a plan exactly is used to stop him, according to his own literalist principles. What is more, a law of Venice which punishes any alien who threatens the life of a citizen is brought against him, and all that he values is taken from him. He is not converted spiritually, by persuasion, divine vision, or miracle, but rather by force, as part of a punishment rather than as an entry into what either the author or the audience could see as a positive new stage of development. The implication is clear that, by this point in history, the mythic pattern of salvation history is appropriate only to Christians, not to Jews at all. They are no longer seen as representatives of an Old Testament way of thinking which may be fulfilled in the acceptance of New Testament ideals, but could be shown as a collection of materialistic and mercenary people who deserve whatever punishment is meted out to them. Shylock's basic humanity, as discussed by Derek Cohen, has its effect on a modern audience, but leaves the characters in the play unmoved.

Despite the fact that the name of Shylock has come to be synonymous with the Renaissance stereotype of the vicious Jew, he cannot hold a candle to the greedy and destructive Barabas in Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*. His wickedness is apparent from his murderous and treacherous deeds in the course of the play, but what is perhaps more effective is his self-definition, early in the action, when he allies himself with a Moor named Ithamore:

> As for myself, I walk abroad a-nights,
> And kill sick people groaning under walls;
> Sometimes I go about and poison wells;
> And now and then, to cherish Christian thieves,
> I am content to lose some of my crowns,
> That I may, walking in my gallery,
> See 'em go pinioned along by my door.
> Being young, I studied physic, and began
> To practise first upon the Italian;
> There I enrich'd the priests with burials,
> And always kept the sexton's arm in ure
> With digging graves and ringing dead men's knells ...
> Then after that was I an usurer,
> And with extorting, cozening, forfeiting,
> And tricks belonging unto brokery,
> I fill'd the gaols with bankrupts in a year,
> And with young orphans planted hospitals.[15]

He is presented as a perfect counterpart to the evil Moor, who has spent his life

> In setting Christian villages on fire,
> Chaining of eunuchs, binding galley slaves.
> One time I was an hostler in an inn,
> And in the night time secretly would I steal
> To travellers' chambers, and there cut their throats.
> Once at Jerusalem, where the pilgrims kneel'd,
> I strewed powder on the marble stones,
> And therewithal their knees would rankle so
> That I have laugh'd a-good to see the cripples
> Go limping home to Christendom on stilts.[16]

Barabas's response to the similarity between their natures and past careers is to make Ithamore his companion, since they are

both circumcised and both hate Christians. In this work, the salvation history pattern is completely lost, and the literary Jew is associated not with a stage of development, but with the irredeemable evil, and the "Jew as Satan" motif as firmly established, all but obliterating the image of the Jew as guardian of the Law. To make the process complete, Marlowe evokes the name of Machiavelli, so that Barabas is connected not only with mythic evil but with the man who represented all that was considered evil in contemporary political practice. Each of these negative characteristics, as has been shown above, took on a life of its own over the succeeding centuries.

The examination of these texts, from the perspective of literary history, reveals the period from 900 to 1600 as a time of steady disintegration of a formulaic "happy ending" plot line and the progressively negative depiction of one of its elements. This conclusion, however, becomes quite disturbing when we move beyond that narrow scholarly point of view. First, the increasingly vicious portrayal of Jews coincides with another development in narrative technique, one which modern readers generally consider a positive step, both in literature and real life. In the medieval texts all the characters, Jewish or Christian, are presented not as individual humans with lives and personalities of their own, but as flat "types," playing out their roles according to predetermined patterns. It is only with the increased interest in depicting "well-rounded" people that characters such as Shylock and Barabas become possible; they begin a developmental process that leads to Fagin and the usurious manipulators in Trollope's works. We must ask whether the gains outweigh the losses when authors shift their focus from plot to the individualized characters so valued by modern readers.

The second problem with a positive evaluation of the medieval pattern emerges when we step outside the bounds of purely literary study. For whom is the ending "happy"? Only for literary characters, who have no real existence. Who defined "happy"? The Christian author and the Christian audience. What is the real source of the power to label the Hebrew Scriptures as the "Old" Testament and to declare what their "spiritual" meaning is? What would be the effect of such stories on an audience, as opposed to the intention we may deduce from a purely literary analysis? We may surmise that a medieval Christian who took these stories seriously would treat real Jews the way stage Christians treat stage Jews. What would happen when there

was no real miracle to correspond to the stage miracle, when no one was raised from the dead and no crucifix spoke, and the real Jew did not convert? A Renaissance Jew could perhaps improve his position with Christians by convincing them that he was not like Shylock or Barabas, but a medieval Jew who obstinately refused to follow the literary pattern of Judas and Jonathas would be signing his own death warrant. How can we be sure that Chaucer's audience would be able, without the benefit of footnotes and the leisure to examine other texts and to evaluate his intentions, to see that he was not inciting hatred against Jews? It was, after all, during the medieval period that accusations of ritual murder against the Jews brought about their expulsion from England, and performances of the continental analogues to *The Play of the Sacrament* resulted in anti-Jewish riots. On the other hand, it was shortly after the productions of *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Jew of Malta* that Jews were allowed to return to England. Just as the placement of a stereotyped image in the full literary context of a narrative complicates the understanding of that image and confounds any attempt at simplistic analysis, then, the recognition that literary activity takes place in a complex social environment forces continual re-evaluation of the uses both poets and critics make of stock characters and stock plots in their communication with their audiences.

21 Rosenberg, *From Shylock to Svengali*, 173.
22 *Letters* II, 86, 396. See also *Letters* V, 58: "I feel too deeply the difficult complications that beset every measure likely to affect the position of women and also I feel too imperfect a sympathy with many women who have put themselves forward in connexion with such measures, to give any practical adhesion to them. There is no subject on which I am more inclined to hold my peace and learn, than on the 'Women Question.' It seems to overhang abysses, of which even prostitution is not the worst ... But on one point I have a strong conviction ... And that is, that women ought to have the same fund of truth placed within their reach as men have" (4 October 1869). For a recent, sympathetic discussion of George Eliot's relation to the women's movement of her day, see Gillian Beer, *George Eliot* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), chap. 6.
23 Haight, *George Eliot*, 396.
24 And while she is the only woman in George Eliot's fiction to express the conflict between creative self-fulfillment and motherhood, we might legitimately be tempted to speculate whether George Eliot's own decision not to have children may have had sources beyond her irregular – in Victorian terms – relationship with Lewes.
25 *Letters* IV, 298.

CHAPTER SIX

1 All references to *Ulysses* are to the Penguin edition of the corrected text, ed. Hans Walter Gabler with Wolfhard Steppe and Claus Melchior (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd, 1986).
2 Richard Ellmann, *Ulysses on the Liffey* (NY: Oxford University Press 1972), 186.

CHAPTER SEVEN

1 Giovanni Boccaccio, *Il Decamerone*, ed. G. Petronio (Torino: Einaudi, 1966); *The Decameron*, tran. John Payne, rev. C.S. Singleton (Berkeley: University of California, 1982).
2 *La Chanson de Roland*, ed. J. Bédier (Paris: L'Edition d'Art H. Piazza, 1937); *The Song of Roland*, tran. R. Harrison (NY: Mentor, 1970).
3 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, rev. N. Davis (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967); *Sir Gawain*

and the Green Knight, tran. B. Stone (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).

4 Ross G. Arthur, "A Head for a Head: A Testamental Template for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Wife of Bath's Tale*," *Florilegium* 6 (1984): 178–94.

5 Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Chevalier au Lion (Yvain)*, ed. Mario Roques (Paris: Champion, 1978); translated in Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, tran. D.D.R. Owen (London: Dent, 1987).

6 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987); translated in Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, tran. D. Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

7 Cynewulf, *Elene*, ed. P.O.E. Gradon (London: Methuen, 1958), 11. 333–49; translated in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, ed. S.A.J. Bradley (London: Dent, 1982).

8 *Elene*, 11., 883–93.

9 *Elene*, 11., 1228–35.

10 *The Play of the Sacrament (Croxton)* 11., 199–204 (modernized); in *Medieval Drama*, ed. D. Bevington (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975).

11 Cecilia Cutts, "The Croxton Play: An Anti-Lollard Piece," *Modern Language Quarterly* 5 (1944): 45–60.

12 Wright's translation of line 632 (1822).

13 W. Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. J.R. Brown (London: Methuen, 1961).

14 C. Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta*, in *Complete Plays and Poems*, ed. E.D. Pendry (London: Dent, 1976).

15 Marlowe, II, iii, 176–90.

16 Marlowe, II, iii, 205–14.